

Black Mesa group wants

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WINDOW ROCK - Community members from the Black Mesa area are telling the Navajo Nation Council's Naa Bik'iyáti' Committee - very politely - that the rent is due.

On July 7, Black Mesa United Inc., a nonprofit community organization, reminded the Naa Bik'iyáti' Committee, which includes all 24 delegates, that residents were promised "jobs, roads, running water, and electrical power" 40 years ago in exchange for going along with their government's decision to approve strip mining on Black Mesa.

BMU member Carl Etsitty said most of the community's elders are waiting for the tribe and the mining company, Peabody Western Coal Co., to fulfill their promises.

Now the citizen group is working to realize the elders' vision with a request to their leaders to fund several community infrastructure projects, beginning with phase 1 of the \$5.2 million Manymules Waterline Project.

The waterline is among 16 proposed projects that include roads, boundary fencing, electrical lines, cell towers, windmills, corrals, stock ponds, a transfer station for trash, housing repairs, and a land-use plan. All are listed in a 31-page statement titled "Needs of Black Mesa Residents within the Peabody Western Coal Company Leasehold Area."

The total cost for the 16 projects is \$93.2 million, according to BMU's reckoning.

In a statement distributed the Naa Bik'iyáti' Committee, BMU board member Karletta Chief said, "The fact that (coal mine) leasehold area residents have no running water and less than 50 percent have electricity is a serious injustice ... the ancestral land of Black Mesa residents are being destroyed and they suffer from environmental destruction and adverse health impacts ..."

"... but, on the other hand, the Navajo Nation allows (Peabody) to supply 13 million tons of coal per year for the past 47 years to provide electricity and water needs for six million homes in the state of Nevada, California and Arizona."

Chief, a former Miss Navajo Nation, graduated from Stanford

University with bachelor's and master's degrees in environmental engineering. She also holds a Ph.D. in hydrology from the University of Arizona.

Chief and Etsitty both noted that Black Mesa residents have repeatedly pleaded for health studies to be conducted as proof that the "sulfur oxides, nitrogen oxides, ash, dust and other harmful minerals" associated with coal mining and burning is responsible for unusually high number of elders, adults, teens and children suffering from asthma and cancer.

Etsitty noted that projects were proposed and developed by community members from Great Springs, Sagebrush Springs, Sand Springs, Yellow Water, White Grass and White House, communities that are all located near Peabody's two coal mines on the mesa.

Chapters may benefit

The communities are located in four different chapters - Forest Lake, Kayenta, Kífts'ííí and Shonto, which makes it challenging to complete the various infrastructure improvements they need, Etsitty said.

Etsitty said Black Mesa United has asked the chapters numerous times to contribute financially to their community projects, but they have not done so.

Group members then tried seeking chapter approval of support resolutions to take to the Council in search of funding, but couldn't muster the votes needed to approve the resolutions.

Etsitty said the chapters on Black Mesa incorrectly believe that area get financial help from Peabody, but in reality when residents ask Peabody for help, they are told to go to their chapter.

He accused the local chapter houses of being out of touch with their constituents who come from the areas most impacted by the mining.

BMU is trying to help the residents become active and develop their own community projects, and seek a fair share of the money their tribal government and chapters receive in royalty and fee payments from Peabody for the resources being stripped from their ancestral homelands, he told the Naa Bik'iyáti' Committee.

The group is asking the tribe

to set aside 50 percent, or \$1.75 million, annually from the Peabody coal royalties to help pay for community development projects on the mesa.

The BMU proposals were immediately questioned by several delegates, including Jonathan Nez (Navajo Mountain/Oljato/Shonto/Ts'ah bii Kin), whose district includes a small portion of Black Mesa and would benefit from some of the proposed projects.

LoRenzo Bates (Nenahnezad/Newcomb/San Juan/T'iistoh Sikaad/Tsé Daa K'aan/Upper Fruitland), who heads the Council's Budget and Finance Committee, wanted assurances that Black Mesa United truly represents communities from the coal mining area.

"Anytime Peabody is a point of discussion, various organizations show up," Bates said. "Are you speaking on behalf of all those organizations? If you're not, there needs to be one voice."

Nez and Joshua Lavar Butler (Tó Nanees Dizi) agreed.

Butler said when several organizations don't see eye-to-eye, as is occurring in the former Bennett Freeze part of his district, it makes it difficult for the Council to identify and support projects that are truly community supported and beneficial.

Nez and Butler both recommended that BMU meet with other community organizations from the area, which they did not specify, and return with a united voice.

Mel Begay (Bahastl'ah/Coyote Canyon/Mexican Springs/Naschitti/Tohatchi) couldn't understand why BMU couldn't work with its chapters and Nelson Begaye (Lukachukai/Rock Point/Round Rock/Tsaile-Wheatfields/Tsé Ch'ízhí) wanted to see detailed project plans.

Both delegates also questioned whether the BMU could provide financial accountability.

Try asking an expert

But the delegate whose district

promises fulfilled

includes five of the eight chapters on Black Mesa, and all of those most directly affected by the mining, congratulated the citizen group for taking the initiative to address basic needs, such as running water, electricity and paved bus routes in their communities.

None of the skeptical delegates consulted freshman Council member Dwight Witherspoon (Forest Lake/Hardrock/Kits'itli/Piñon/Whippoorwill) for his thoughts on the situation in his district. But when he spoke, it was to say he appreciated Black Mesa United for organizing a nonprofit that is focused on developing projects to meet real needs.

Fellow newcomer Walter Phelps (Birdsprings/Cameron/Coalmine Mesa/Leupp/Tolani Lake) also was supportive, as was Katherine Benally (Chilchinbeto/Dennehotso/Kayenta), whose district borders Witherspoon's and includes some of the proposed projects.

Benally urged committee members to focus on innovative

ways to fund BMU, instead of looking for reasons to say no. She recommended that the Council approve \$2 million for BMU to get the Manymules water project started, funneling it through the chapters. The Council should mandate to the chapters that the \$2 million be for the BMU's water project, to assure the money doesn't end up somewhere else, she said.

These Black Mesa residents took the initiative to form their own nonprofit and plan for themselves, Benally said.

"They need help and the Council's been helping the Navajo Nation all these years," Benally said. "Don't you hear them? I hear them. They're saying 'help us so we can help ourselves.'"

The Naa Bik'iyáti' Committee voted 13-0 to accept the BMU report, but it will require further legislative action to grant the group's request for funding and other tribal support.